CRITICAL REMARKS UPON SOME OF THE MONUMENTS AT VENICE, AND IN OTHER PLACES ON THE ROUTE THITHER.*

THE noble group of buildings which surround the principal piazza of the city first claim attention. Here the arts of each successive era are combined, and in such a manner that they mutually enhance each other: the towering campanile forms as it were a centre: the long and level buildings of the Renaissance architects bound three sides of the piazza and one of the piazzetta; and opposite to these stand the venerable palace of the Doges, and the fair front of the church of St. Mark. I shall be excused, therefore, for asking you to turn your back upon the works of Sansovino and Scamozzi, in order to direct your attention to those of the nobler era of the Republic of Venice; for these,—thanks to the latent patriotism of the senate, who rejected the proposition of Palladio to destroy the palace and to rebuild it in his modern style, which if it had been carried into effect, should have caused us to execrate his name,—are but little altered, and by their solemn grandeur, undisturbed by the motley groups around, or by the Austrian livery by which they are sometimes desecrated, involuntarily recall to the mind the glorious days of the state when its fleets swept the Adriatic, and its merchant princes were found in honour in every court of Europe.

The church of St. Mark, now, but not formerly, the cathedral of the city, displays dominant over all the interpolations of subsequent periods the forms of Eastern art; yet from the fact of the whole not having been erected at one time, there may be just such an apparent want of correctness and unity in the composition of its façade, as may prevent those who are not accustomed to bestow more than a passing glance on any building to feel a certain dissatisfaction with it. At least, I cannot otherwise account for the strange want of taste which has led several critics to condemn it on the score of ugliness: alas! eyes they may have, but I fear they do not know how to see with them. There is throughout such an evident manliness and daring in the construction,—such an appropriateness in every portion of the magnificent ornament with which it is encrusted,—such a freedom from conventional laws, and yet an implicit obedience to those which would be imposed by nature,—as cannot fail to impress the mind of any one who should examine it more closely; and having myself, day after day, for weeks in succession, sat in the piazza before it, each time that I gazed upon it, it appeared to me more lovely, and something fresh seemed to reveal itself which before had escaped my notice.

Time would fail me were I to attempt even to enumerate the various points of interest which its varied details present; for no two of its capitals or carved ornaments are alike: in each some feature seems to have caught the eye of the artist and to have been elaborated by his hand, and among them may be found the types of almost the different classes which are prevalent in other countries. I will, therefore, remark only upon some of the more obvious arrangements of its architecture.

The plan of the church is that of the simple Greek cross, having a dome over the crux and each arm, lighted by a row of small semicircular windows, opening into the lower part of the cupolas. The domes, apparent from the exterior, and which are of elegant Arabian forms, are raised above those within, and formed of carpentry. Around the arm of the cross which forms the nave, there is a spacious vestibule covered by shallow domical vaults, the whole of which, as well as the sides, are encrusted with the older mosaics of the Byzantine school. On the southern side, towards the Piazzetta, this vestibule is inclosed and occupied as the chapel of Zeno family, and the Baptistery.

This portion forms also an important feature in the façade, projecting before the body of the church, which rises above it, and having a spacious gallery upon the top, it is occupied by seven semicircular arches: of these the centre one is the widest in span: the two on either side are next in width, and correspond with each other; and the outer arches on either side are narrow and stilted, and project beyond the returns of the vestibule: the whole are supported on double ranges of columns of the most precious marble,—trophies of conquest brought from the East: those of the lower range are loftier than those above, which at the angles causes a curious arrangement, there being at those parts five of the smaller columns clustered on the spreading capital of the one below.

The entrances themselves are deeply recessed, so as to produce a fine shadow. The proportion of this lower story is very exquisite, by the variation both in the spans of the arches, and in the heights of the two ranges of columns. The upper portion, which has five semi-circular arches over the five central ones below, seems hardly to rise sufficiently above this vestibule: the details, however, are alike excellent, excepting the pinnacles and fringes of foliage to the arches, which support no entablature: these being mostly of a later date, are rank and coarse in design and execution. The domes are beautiful in form, and, though small, I, for one, would not wish them larger, as they would otherwise crush the façade, and detract from the effect of the palace and campanile.

The interior being more completely in one style, possesses, perhaps, more repose and unity than the exterior. Its gorgeous, yet harmonious, colouring, is most striking. The divisions of the aisles is generally by a range of columns, which bear an entablature and gallery wide enough for a person to pass, but does not rise to the roof: up to the level of this gallery, the walls are encrusted with a marble of deep reddish tone, and above with mosaics on a golden ground: the pavement is likewise of mosaics of marble. The details are equally fine with those of the exterior: the few weeks' study I was able to bestow upon them seemed only to reveal their infinity.

I must now, however, pass to a description of the Doge's palace, which may be considered as the type of the purest Venetian Gothic architecture. The plan of this building is a hollow square, of which the sides towards the sea and the piazzetta are supported on arcades, the lower one having arches of wider span than that above: its columns are partly sunk into the ground from the accumulation of the soil. The upper one has circular traceries between the arch-head, and is a most noble feature: it supports a lofty wall, perforated with large arched windows at intervals, the central one of either side being decorated with a rich framework of later design than the lower part. The walls are chequered with rose-coloured marble. The interior has suffered greatly from fire, so that none of the original ceilings remain, which is much to be regretted. The court within and the giant's staircase are of Palladian architecture, having a certain elegance; but the eye may rove in vain over their details for the spirit and beauty of those of the original work. The capitals of the lower story of the exterior façades are by far the finest; but even these are exceedingly unequal in merit. There may be half a dozen different types displayed by them, from which the others have been copied. These few, of the better character, are, in my opinion, the finest and most suitable capitals for their purpose which I have ever seen, whether considered for their design or execution.

Altogether, this class of Venetian Gothic, of which the Doge's palace is the finest specimen, is of a most noble and grand character, and far better, I think, than the ordinary development of Lombard Gothic, of which the churches of the Frari, and of St. Giovanni, and St. Paolo in Venice, and St. Anastasia, and other churches in Verona are examples, although doubtless there are many very fine qualities and details in these. But as a style, the one is broad and effective, the other somewhat poor and flat. The first may rank by the side of the best northern Gothic, which is to be found in France and England, and in detail, perhaps, before it. It is to be noted, however, that it is only found in secular architecture, to which it appears particularly applicable, and for which reason it is of great value, as our Gothic is more peculiarly ecclesiastical. The other style, as far as I know it, I do not consider can claim at all the same position. I agree with the opinion expressed concerning it by Professor Willis, and state this even with the remembrance of the tombs of Venice and Verona. Some of their foliage ornaments are certainly exquisite, and a few of the effigies unsurpassed; but as compositions combining architectural and sculptural merits, I should place them in rank beneath those of the two Valences in Westminster Abbey, or the Percy shrine in Beverley Minster. I am told that there are finer works of Gothic than these which I have seen, in Florence and elsewhere farther south, of which I cannot speak; but as far as I can judge, I believe the peculiar value of Italian Gothic is, that it shows how admirably it may be applied to any and every purpose, to domestic and secular architecture as well as to that which is ecclesiastical.

I have already far exceeded the limits I had proposed to myself, but must before I conclude make some brief remarks on others of the buildings at Venice. That which I have said of the Doge's palaces, will generally apply to those of the same class, as the Foscari and Giustiniani and other palaces, whose grand ranges of central traceried windows are so effective: the windows with their ornamental framework, however, of their upper stories are usually too square and do not finish well the composition: in a few instances they are pointed, which is far better. They seem also to want more important cornices. Of Arabian architecture there are some elegant and beautiful examples, with stilted semicircular arches in long ranges, and with delicate variations of proportions, such as the palace Loredan, and the Turkish Caravanserai. The arabesques with which they are decorated are also very beautiful, and small panels with quaint grotesque carvings are frequently found upon them. Of the earlier Renaissance school of the Lombardi there are some very elegant structures, among which I may particularly mention the Palace Corner Spinelli, by the Grand Canal, for its exquisite proportion. The façade of the Palace Vendramini Calergi, though but a mask—as in a greater or less degree, are those of most of the later palaces—is a good design: it has a fine cornice, but the main divisions into order are too equal in height. The lateral arrangement is far better in proportion. Upon these buildings some of the details still possess some interest: although they have neither the originality, fancy, nor vigorous expression of the earlier work; yet the porphyry and marble panels which adorn the Palaces Dario and Trevisan, and others of the same date, are very beautiful. There are also some elegant churches of the Lombardi school, *e. g.* S. Zacharias, S. Maria dei Miracoli, and the Scuola di S. Marco, which are elegant, and have rich semicircular pediments with acroteria. Of the modern Italian founded on the revived classical there are numerous examples. By Sansovino we have the Library of St. Mark, the Cornaro Palace, now the Austrian Legation, with others which possess to my eye a certain prettiness of effect and elegance of proportion, without any manner of dignity, and the details are so utterly meaningless that they seem to repel examination. The Palace Grimani, now the Post-office, by San Michele, struck me as being far more grand and noble than any of Sansovino's edifices: indeed, it seemed to me to be the only work of the school in Venice which, from its chasteness and adherence to the laws of its own style, might give some pretext to its architect or admirers to find fault with the irregularities of the older buildings I have described. The works of Palladio, for instance, abound with the misapplication of the most important members, with the monstrosities of broken pediments, columns on stilts, and of constructive features used only for ornament, that it seems to me to be sheer prejudice to pass over such glaring errors, to cavil at the license that has been taken with the columns at the angles of St. Mark's

* See p. 276, ante.

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